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Good Conversation

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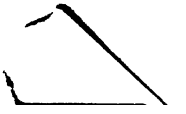
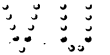


THE CHARMS AND SECRETS

OF

GOOD CONVERSATION.

With thee conversing, I forget all time.—MILTON.
To speak, and to speak well, are two things.—JONSON.



BY
THEODORE E. SCHMAUK.

NINTH THOUSAND.

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Like apples of gold in pictures of silver.—PROVERBS.

The sweetness of the lips increaseth learning.—PROVERBS.

How forcible are right words!—JOB.

Doth not the ear try words?—JOB.

Pleasant words are sweet to the soul.—PROVERBS.

The lips of a fool will swallow up himself.—ECCLESIASTES.

They think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.—CHRIST.

Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?—JOB.

Always with grace, seasoned with salt, knowing how to answer every man.—PAUL.

Speech is but broken light upon the depth
Of the unspoken.—THE SPANISH GYPSY.

The Charms and Secrets
of
Good Conversation.

WHEN the golden apple rolled in on the wedding feast of Peleus and Thetis, and by its inscription, "For The Most Beautiful," awakened a rivalry in the breasts of Juno and Minerva and Venus, poor Paris must have stood perplexed at deciding between the wondrous inducements offered by each of the jealously competing goddesses.

To-day the goddesses of knowledge, art and culture are yet competing for the golden apple.

Each of them would charm us into making for her an award of our precious golden hours. Each has devoted embassadors who gain our ear and plead her cause.

Philip Gilbert Hamerton drops his palette and his critique of art, and lovingly leads us into "The Intellectual Life." He would point out and remove the impediments in its path. He would fascinate us with its pure and lofty culture.

Henry D. Thoreau, abandoning all political and religious privileges, walking forth from his father's manufactory of lead pencils and from the complete set of Oriental treasures in his library, dedicating his genius to the hills and waters, would draw us with him into the solitudes of Nature.

John Burroughs, that apostle of pedestrians, would have fashionable society to use the foot, instead of sitting about the summer hotels, eating, dressing, and looking bored. He would take us afoot through two States and up into the mountains of the third, and would vouch for the gladdening of our innermost spirit as we pass along and drink in the exhilarations of the road, the meadow and the by-paths.

Maurice Thompson, forsaking his law office and his cozy literary corner, would persuade us to go on a jaunt, by ways none ever trod, over breezy fields to the sylvan haunts of birds and poets, and kindle in our breast a new and intimate sympathy with Nature's many moods.

Each enthusiastic lover of a favorite goddess tries to tempt us within the circle of her subtle charms. The musician would lure us over the borderlands of consciousness and set us afloat delightfully in the boundless seas of imagination and reverie. The author comes forward most confidingly to beckon us out of our own identity and to absorb our deepest self in scenes and souls created and portrayed by his genius. The poet bids us climb upward on the rounds of that lofty, rhythmically swaying ladder of lines to transporting visions and ecstasies of delight. The great orator hopes to hold us spellbound, in spite of ourselves.

I am not ashamed to place the solace, the joys, the aspirations and the stimulus to be found in

good conversation side by side with those which are aimed after in the more select and lofty pursuits of art, or in the more lonely communion with Nature. After all, there is no charm more simple, more pure, more living, more complete, than that which gleams out along the threads of exquisitely woven conversation.

Here our own nature is not sunk and lost either in itself or in any scene or soul, but is set aglow gently and fully by the magnetic attraction of another personality. Two minds and hearts, each throbbing with currents of thought and feeling, meet in a series of electric touches. Two entirely different existences come together and each opens a little of its individuality to the other. Moved

and attracted by a being outside of ourselves, there is yet a pleasurable and responsive revelation of self. Neither the scenery of Paradise nor the company of his own thoughts was half as delightful to Adam as the voice of his Eve; and old Cicero has truly said—a man would have no pleasure in discovering all the beauties of the universe, even in Heaven itself, unless he had a partner to whom he might communicate his joy.

Conversation is so delightfully free. Is there any other intellectual exercise so spontaneous? No toilsome and beaten track to tread. No distant tree of knowledge to be painfuliy approached step by step before we can pluck and enjoy the fruit. We are authors without the responsibilities

of authorship. No classic standards to which we must conform. No hedges to fence us out from tempting fields. We are intellectual ramblers. Our own sweet will is the guide. We can go with a hop, a skip, and a jump! The original grace and impulsive sprightliness of our mind come out without fear of restraint.

Here the very best is the informal, the extempore, the unpremeditated. Unconstraint is in every word. There are no set times, no days, no audiences to prescribe to or to suffocate the spirit. There are no stiff boundaries of logic to hedge it in. We begin at any moment, on any subject, and go to any point, and stop at any time. Taking to itself the most delicate and delicious flavors

of individuality, and flashing out with all the rainbow hues of the successive moments, our communing with a fellow-soul gives us a delight all the more intense, because it is as broad and living and unrestrained by form as is life itself.

To what shall we compare the eager, artless talk of happy children? We sit for hours and listen to their fresh exclamations wreathed and framed about with bright looks and fairy-like movements.

"I chatter over stony ways
In little sharps and trebles.
I bubble into eddying bays,
I babble on the pebbles.

"I wind about, and in and out,
With here a blossom sailing,
And here and there a lusty trout,
And here and there a grayling."

"I chatter, chatter, as I flow
To join the brimming river,
For men may come and men may go,
But I go on forever."

Indeed the life of all genuine conversation is like the life of the brook, whose liquid contents glide forever into ever-changing shapes. The life of the brook, as painted in the beautiful words of an English artist, is "an incessant alternation, rest and motion, darkness and sparkle and glitter. Like wayward geniuses it is alternately deep and shallow. Its gloomy pools have a deathful appearance, especially for people who cannot swim. There are places where it lies asleep under the trees for a considerable distance, then suddenly it awakens and begins to be noisy again like a child.

In the course of its wanderings it may come to a rough country with rather a steep decline, and then it has no peace; it must go on hurry-scurry till it gets through all that region, and it makes a great to-do about it, gurgling in the hollows of the rocks and not going really half so fast as it appears to go with all that fuss and foam. In quieter and more level regions it lingers in many curves, and is always deepest under the bank it cuts out, while it gets shallower on the other side, where it spreads the burrowed pebbles and sand. It is welcomed in lordly parks, where it flows under stately oaks, and the fallow-deer come to drink of it. It is welcome at the village. It is loved and studied in little bits by the solitary artist

who stops at the village inn; it is followed for miles by the angler who knoweth every pool. The naturalist delights in it, because he can find a little world for his observation."

It would be extremely difficult to search out a more complete and lovely image of the stream of conversation. The deeps and shallows are there—the deathful and distrusted pools for tongues that cannot swim—the places where it lies asleep for a considerable distance, and the noisy hurry-scurry with much fuss and foam—the lingering in gentle curves, and the leisurely dropping of borrowed pebbles in its quiet breadths—the welcome in the park and at the inn—the little bits of the solitary traveler—its use by the angler, who hopes in it to

catch his fish—"he knoweth every pool"—the student of nature who takes his truest observations of the human heart in watching on its banks.

To converse is sweeter than to write. It is also more life-like. It is more natural and easy than to proclaim formally from the rostrum. Then, too, the author is such a helpless soul without his publisher's costly presses, and the preacher is generally so silent without his established pulpit; but the converser's requirement for bliss is not costly machinery nor elaborate endowment. He needs no pianos or pigments or marbles. Materials offer themselves unsought in the instant they are needed, and are worked-up unconsciously and without any effort.

Conversation is an effusion from within. It is not studied like sermons or poems or speeches or books. It cannot be cut and dried. It cannot be condensed and put-up in cans for the market in quantities to suit any purchaser. It is like running spring water. It dare not be stale. It bubbles and effervesces every moment with the life of the moment. There is nothing into which the ceaseless and ever-shifting play of our thoughts, the changes of scenery and circumstances and feeling, can fit so readily and so completely. Each ephemeral phase of the instant surcharges with life the flow of that instant's conversation.

"The busy shuttle comes and goes
. . . . . and deftly weaves
A tissue out of autumn leaves,
With here a thistle, there a rose."

A very great charm in conversation is found in the confidential air of its disclosures. It is face to face—heart to heart—soul to soul. It is personality kindling personality. The eye, the smile, the set lines of the countenance, the pleading, or nestling, or saucy air, the involuntary attitude and self-poise, the flashing gesture or sudden shrug, are alive with a thousand subtle meanings! What "whispered balm" imparted—what "sunshine spoken!"

> "She and I the banquet scene completing
> With dreamy words—and very pleasant eating!"

"Never is the deep, strong voice of man, or the low, sweet voice of woman, finer than in the earnest mellow tones of familiar speech, richer than

the richest music, which are a delight while they are heard, which linger still upon the ear in softened echoes, and which, when they have ceased, come, long after, back to memory, like the murmurs of a distant hymn." To recall again the olden times, and live over again the happy days in festive communion with the old companion, is the quintessence of conversational-joy.

> "So sweet it seems with thee to walk,
> And once again to woo thee mine—
> It seems in after-dinner talk,
> Across the walnuts and the wine."

Sitting beneath the starlight in the little palace-tower with his noble Jewish mother, Ben Hur's troubled heart and boyish tongue found one kindly listener, just one, nearer to him than the angels—

nearer than the fair Egyptian he met in after days.

Another delight in conversation arises from the surprises of its windings, the thrill of its bold dashes, the speed of its transitions, the distance of its destinations. No railroad train can rival it in these respects. It can outrun the lightning. By a single bound, it will leap the Atlantic. On a bridge of one slender thread it can scale the loftiest barrier and cross the stormiest sea. No summer-excursion party ever enjoys such varied beauty of scenery or makes such pleasing discoveries, as one half-hour's exploration through your neighbor's soul unfolds to you.

The night comes. Sight recedes and activity subsides. Forth from the crackling camp-fire of

conversation, on which each of the company, gathered round, has thrown his lighter fagot or heavier log, there leap the flames of cheerfulness, and scintillate the sparks of wit, blazing forth in successive showers—there radiates the genial warmth of friendship.

When the embers have burnt low, and peaceful silence broods over every soul, a torch may still be lighted and carried forth by each departing spirit, to illuminate the darkness of the uncertain path on which it now must move singly and silently on.

ONE morning last summer I took a long walk through the woods. Not in those mighty cathedrals of hemlocks nor in the cozy nooks of laurel could a sound be heard—save the soft tread on the dry, spongy bed of leaves and needles beneath and the incessant babble of one whom I had been foolish enough to ask along for the sake of companionship! My friend's spirit was not in tune with the environments. He was an intelectual and an acute observer, abounding with in-

formation—a fine moralizer. Yet all that he said was a profanation of these sweet-tuned solitudes, jarring on my sensitive soul. His form looms up to my mind even now—the shadowy contour of a typical bore.

Social bores! Let us spend an evening with them. We need not go far, though it would be cynical, even untrue, to say, like Byron, that society is formed of two mighty tribes, the bores and the bored. For it is with society as with a punch: "everything depends upon the ingredients of which it is composed." Yet in ordinary society mutually distasteful ingredients abound.

The social punch bowl of unskillful or unhappy mixture, may be a friend's parlor, a public recep-

tion, a flying coach on wheels. It may be our own fireside, where neighbors have gathered by common consent.

Here is a group that wearies me almost beyond endurance. They weary by their volubility. They are chatterboxes. We do tire of mere talkativeness. Cannot we gently intimate: "I should think your tongue had broken its chain!" It seems really to be one

> "Like Della's o'er her cup
> That runs for ages without winding up."

I am as silent as the grave. I fear to utter a single word. It might provoke the outburst of a fresh and completely overwhelming stream of hot lava from the eruptive craters. I consolingly flatter

myself by the thought, that for once in my life, I am in the same temper with the poet Horace. Keen was his taste in conversation, and inexpressible delight his companionship, "but he had so strong an antipathy to a great talker that he was afraid, some time or other, it would be mortal to him!"

Seriously, dear friend, let me interrupt you just for an instant and beseech you to listen to one word from the master talker—the autocrat of the breakfast table. He says: Talking is like playing on the harp; there is as much in laying the hand on the strings to stop their vibrations, as in twanging them to bring out their music.

What a noisy and self-sufficient chorus congre-

gates under the chandelier. Do you note my eye, that it is growing green. A malicious reminiscence runs in my mind. It is the sarcastic simile of Burke. Because half a dozen grasshoppers under a fern make the field ring with their importunate chink while thousands of great cattle reposefully chew the cud and are silent, pray do not imagine that those who make the noise are the only inhabitants of the field, or that, after all, they are other than the little shrivelled, meagre, hopping insects of the hour.

Upon the first opportunity, I retreat to the opposite corner of the room. But what insipid and watery punch have we here? Must I already repent me of my slanders? What poverty-s'ricken tongues! and

nothing for us but commonplace. Not grace of individuality, nor charm of originality, I find here. The occasion does not lend itself to their utterance. Poor quality of talk ! They are uninteresting. What misery ! Forgive me, ye tongue-gifted—I long for your riches !

Let us change circles, or rather—in deference to the figure—try another bowl. Now we are getting dry punch, sure. The ingredients are solemn and mysterious. We find the company tedious ; not because of what they say, rather because they fail to say anything. Prolonged silence hangs around us like an oppressive pall. Are they too exalted to condescend to speak in our presence, too cold-hearted to be stirred to utterance, too suspicious to

confide a whisper, or too moody to smile on us graciously, too bungling to venture one thought, or even too stupid to frame a single retort? It is a conundrum to perplex a Solomon. Let us at least make an impression by striding away in lofty indignation.

Here is an easy-going crowd. Everybody chimes in the "Yes, that is so." But we are not comfortable. Whether my friend is not pliable enough or pliable overmuch, makes little difference. "I am equally balked by antagonism and by compliance. The only joy I have in his being mine, is that the *not mine* is *mine*. I hate, where I looked for a manly furtherance, or at least a manly resistance,

to find a mush of concession. Better be a nettle than an echo."

> "Discourse may want an animated 'No!'
> To brush the surface and to make it flow."

But, O, there are silent souls who have their reasons for reticence. There are shy and retiring dispositions who hide their sweetness away like the little wildflower under the leaves of the forest.

What is to be done with the worldful of people who are unable or unwilling to refresh us with their presence? They have foiled us in our advances. They have embarrassed us by failing to be responsive. They have deluged us with the floods. They have stunned us in bursting through our outposts and attempting to advance into the

inner hold of our citadel. I can tell you what *is* done. They are put down on the black list. Many a really kind and agreeable soul by the habitually forbidding look, the stern eye, the icy air, has thus been cut off from the further intercourse of its fellows. It would be astonished if it knew the reason why.

Is not conversation a delicious indulgence to the social part of our make-up? Should it not incline us to bring our quota of good-will or good-humor among the friends we meet? Should we not be willing to kill the fatted calf, or at least to partake of it when it is set before us, and to wear the ring and the robe, and be merry? "Here humor is more than wit, easiness more than knowledge.

Beauty is never so lovely as when adorned with a smile, and conversation never sits easier upon us than when we now and then discharge ourselves in a symphony of laughter, which may not improperly be called the chorus of conversation." We all have sat under the painful entertainment of Dean Swift's sober, deliberate talker.

He proceeds with much thought and caution. He makes his preface, branches out into several digressions, finds a hint that puts him in mind of another story—which he promises to tell you when this is done—comes back regularly to his subject, cannot readily call to mind some person's name, holds his head, complains of his memory—the whole company all this while is in suspense; at

length he says, it is no matter—and so goes on. To crown the business, it perhaps proves at last a story the company has heard fifty times before!

The man who always seizes the lion's share of the social hour, in order that he may "get off" all the fine things that he himself has prepared to say, ought to be put out! He may be the king of talkers, but he is also the king of beasts. The monopolizer is not only greedy, but, especially if he be assuming, is the cruel destroyer of the social circle. The feeling of equality is the poise of easy and agreeable conversation. He who would not be a disturber will take, rather than give, the tone of the company he is in. He will also consent to be taught many "things which he knows already."

He will even be quick to divine whether his companions have "a greater inclination to hear you, or that you should hear them."

Some talkers, like ill-bred children at the table, will not await their turn. To interrupt another, and push one's own tale in, is the height of presumption. It is a notice that the other's words are of little account, and that his information is of less value than mine; or, it is, at least a confession that I am more deeply interested in my own thoughts than in his.

The good listener is essential to conversation. She has been much praised, but not too much. "When I think of talking," says Oliver Wendell Holmes, "it is of course with a woman; for, talk-

ing at its best being an inspiration, it wants a corresponding divine quality of receptiveness, and where will you find this but in woman?" And yet many a woman's sympathetic attention is a mixture of politeness, good-humor, flattery, curiosity and self importance. If the real heart of the listener rose within her eye, our inspiration would droop, and we would not be encouraged to proceed. Sweet and pretty hypocrites are engaging listeners. From the days of Delilah down they have managed to draw out great secrets. With words soft like roses, and the silence of eyes deeper than the evening skies, they persuade the heart into leaping utterance.

If you would insult your talking friend, let your

eye rove and wander. Says La Rochefoucauld, "We find so few people who appear agreeable in conversation because there is scarcely anyone who does not think more of what he is about to say than of answering precisely what is said to him. The cleverest and most complaisant people content themselves with merely showing an attentive countenance, while we can see in their eyes and mind a wandering from what is said to them, and an impatience to return to what they wish to say. Listening well and answering well is one of the greatest perfections that can be attained in conversation."

If the company be large, somewhat more is needed than the art of listening. It is the art of leading.

The larger the number of individuals, the smaller is the field of common confidence, and the scantier is the variety of pleasing thoughts and subjects. There is sore need for some instinctive seer to discover and to start them. Keeping down his own wit, he will delicately shine in the power to draw out the resources of others. Plato tells us that all men, well questioned, answer well. The manner, the place, the time, must be well in mind, and the proper path must be seen ahead. On approaching a perilous brink he must himself with firm hand grasp the reins of the chariot, and with infinite tact bring the whole party safely by. None but he knows the secret of the sharp turn or of the gentle glide.

Further, it will fall to him to untangle knots, to bind and nicely interweave the flying strands of many lips. His words are here and there, to unify the whole. "However irregular and desultory his talk, there is method in the fragments." This office Bacon styles the honorablest part of talk. It is to give the occasion, and again to moderate and to pass to somewhat else; for then a man leads the dance.

At this point conversation passes into diplomacy. It becomes a matter of generalship. The situation is strategic. There is a test of skill in tongue-craft. A *prize* is to be gained or lost, a kingdom, a treaty, a business bargain, a heart, a wife. Now, indeed, to converse is to play a game of chess.

It will not do to broach a topic without considering the consequences of the move. Not to look three or four steps ahead, is to stumble into a dilemma. Nearly all souls have sore spots. One must feel one's way into the heart. How clumsy, to fall into a thorn-brake of conflicting opinions at such a moment, or to tread on an uncanny nest of family feuds that hiss, to step suddenly into deep holes of embarrassing personal revelation, to proudly take up one's position on the peak of a solitary cliff, where the poise is perilous, and the descent is impossible! Suppose I lose my balance and fall into a chilly sea of silence, or lie submerged beneath the jubilant or derisive waves of another's laughter!

Do not grate against deep conviction, or touch a

match to inflammable feeling. That causes the charm to vanish. My religion, my hopes, my friendships, my tastes, perhaps my politics, are too sacred—and may be too fragile—to be handled rudely.

Not all ideas are for everyday use. Just as little as all lovely attire is for everyday wear. Reserve is sometimes singularly beautiful and delicate. There is an eloquent impl'cit expression without words. There is a treasuring up of a golden word until the arrival of the silvery moment:

> "*Dearest!* he longs to speak, as I to know,
> And yet we both refrain."

Have an eye on the mischief-breeders. Words fly out which cut like steel. She speaks poniards,

and every word stabs, says Shakespeare. The worst is, a tongue-wound will not cicatrize and heal. "One doth not know how much an ill-word may empoison liking." Be dumb to great or stubborn disputation. Refute without argument. Excitement will carry too far, and victory will not be worth the cost. Besides, says Dr. Johnson,—and he ought to know,—It is almost always the unhappiness of a victorious disputant to destroy his own authority by claiming too many consequences, or diffusing his proposition to an indefensible extent.

In the social circle a good temper is a greater godsend than a gift of tongues. A little fund of good nature goes further than a big store of clever-

ness. A basketful of good humor burns more beautifully than a barrel of wit. The witty man wants us to admire him. The chances are that we shall despise or detest him—despise him for want of judgment, or detest him for want of humanity. The keen lightning flash is not liked, though it be shudderingly admired. The greater its power to paralyze, the more uncomfortable and unwelcome is its presence.

If the sharp tongue, according to Washington Irving, be the "only edge-tool that grows keener with constant use," its most unhappy shaving is "the last word." They who *will have* the last word, should realize their responsibility. It is the crown and consummation of discourse. "The last

word should be the last word. It is like a finishing-touch given to color: there is nothing more to add. But what precaution is needed in order not to put the last word first!"* Even in bloodless and emotionless dialectic, "wit is a burden when it talks too long." Wit likes to have not only the last, but every effective word. Bacon admonishes, Let him be sure to leave other men their turn to speak, and Macaulay is said to have laid down the dictum, Seize as many half minutes as you can, but let go at the end of your half minute.

Feminine small talk is uninteresting to men, not because the observations are trifling, but because they spring up at random, and do not contribute

**Joubert.*

to the elucidation of any underlying idea. Men like to discuss a thought or principle, while women are apt to take up every question as a personal question.

An empty brain will not converse sensibly. A smiling face is no substitute for a stock of information or experience. Indeed, we keenly feel the weakness of ignorance, and tremble lest we betray it. An inner impulse warns us to avoid topics or to evade questions on a subject of which we are entirely ignorant. We are afraid of making fools of ourselves. If the tormentor suspects our cowardice and is merciless, he is in a position to press its exposure and to wring from us a confession of our ignorance. We then must bitterly regret that

we did not dare to be ignorant of the thing from the outstart.

Without knowledge, experience or fancy, conversation would soon end abruptly. But there are very few subjects on which we do not know at least a little,—enough to keep its bearings; and we can with good grace either inquire for more light, or glide off on one of the innumerable by-paths and cross-switches always opening at every point to other regions in which we are better acquainted.

News, still sparkling with this morning's dew, will give you the chief seat at the breakfast table. But should you be found disclosing a twice-told tale, you will begin with sorrow to take a lower place.

Problems of the day are easy to dip into. They are, however, every editor's stock in trade, and it is peculiarly provoking, after expressing a particularly bright or original opinion, to have some cynic incidentally inquire of your neighbor, what newspaper you are in the habit of reading.

Native insight stands in good stead of large funds of information, and is more naive and piquant in its charming. Emerson has vividly pictured the conversational powers of such a transfiguring genius. "In common hours, society sits cold and statuesque. We all stand waiting, empty,—knowing, possibly, that we car be full, surrounded by mighty symbols, which are not symbols to us, but prose and trivial toys. Then cometh the god,

and converts the statues into fiery men, and by a flash of his eye burns up the veil which shrouded all things, and the meaning of the very furnitnre, of cup and saucer, of chair and clock and tester, is manifest. The facts which loomed so large in the fogs of yesterday—property, climate, breeding, personal beauty and the like—have strangely changed their proportions. All that we reckoned settled shakes and rattles; and literatures, cities, climates, religions, leave their foundations, and dance before our eyes."

The one greatest secret in conversation is to strike and open up a deep and perennially flowing fountain-head of human sympathy. A forbidding face, a clumsy tongue, a repelling demeanor, will

then be but obstructions in the course of the channel, rendering the flow of the waters rather rough and precipitous, perhaps, but not in anywise preventing it. Without sympathy the stream will quickly run dry. There will remain nothing of mutual interest but the weather, or the crops, or the news of the day, stereotyped most likely in its recital, or poisonous gloating over gossip. If you are not living in soul, you cannot shine in words. If your heart is a torpid clam, your mouth will be an automatic parrot. You cannot dip water out of empty spring, and it will not do to draw from a previously filled bucket. It must be fresh and sparkling, or it will be intolerable.

Some people are wonderfully exhilarating the

first time we meet them. But the next time we see them we discover that they have lost their interest for us. "Like hand-organs we have heard all their tunes." The charm of personal novelty is as powerful in conversation as anywhere else. The new face, the new voice, the new way of putting things, the liberty to imagine all graces and excellences and no faults in the as yet undiscovered nature and character of our new friend are very fascinating.

We are to meet some one. A stranger! He is commended. Our fancy begins its play. "He stands to us for humanity. He is what we wish. Having imagined and invested him, we ask how we should stand related in conversation and action with such a man. We are uneasy with fear. All

this exalts conversation with him. We talk better than we are wont. We have the nimblest fancy, a richer memory, and our dumb devil has taken leave for the time. For long hours we can continue a series of sincere, graceful, rich communications, drawn from the oldest, secretest experience, so that they who sit by, of our own kinsfolk and acquaintance, shall feel a lively surprise at our unusual powers. But as soon as the stranger begins to intrude his partialities, his definitions, his defects, into the conversation, it is all over. He has heard the first, the last, and best he will ever hear from us. He is no stranger now. Vulgarity, ignorance, misapprehension, are old acquaintances. Now, when he comes, he may find the order, the dress,

and the dinner,—but the throbbing of the heart, and the communications of the soul, no more."

But not all new acquaintance eventuates thus. Novelty may wear off, yet freshness not disappear. If the friend's soul be always fresh, the charm will be ever heightening in its effect. In his presence there will be pleasures forevermore. It was a fully matured friendship that pleaded, Entreat me not to leave thee, nor to return from following after thee.

By freshness I do not mean spiciness. Health does not crave too much mustard and pepper. Pungency is a subordinate element, and is never to be rated alongside of sympathy. Sarcasm bites. Fun demoralizes. The humorist will amuse, and

the funny talker will rouse to merriment. They are good as a relief, but not as a staple. The incessant joker is like a man who would spend his life in doing nothing else but shooting off firesquibs. Raillery and keen repartee and quaint conceits and droll reply are proper; but that view of conversation which makes it successful only when it culminates in a laugh, lowers the ideal of communion and intercourse between two human beings. I would rather be the king than his jester. And if life itself is not all a jest, why should our words, those most precious fruits of our highest living, be merely a series of jests!

Slang is the language, the convention, of low life. It is vigorous and forcible. So is the smack-

ing of an eater's lips in appreciation of the food of which he is partaking. Either is a case of emphasis at the expense of elegance. Its images, if foul, betoken a mind that loves to breed in marshes and slime. At the very least, it betrays a coarse-fleshed mental fibre, and a downward rather than an upward gaze. Nevertheless its use often means no more than a weakness for striking phraseology, or indicates an extraordinarily active mind floundering through poverty of lingual resources.

Sometimes the well, like that of Jacob, is deep, but the man has nothing to draw with. The living waters are there, if they could be gotten out. He has copious supplies, but he cannot bring them to bear. He has knowledge, but he knows not

how to use it. It is not ability, but availability that carries off the palm in conversation.

To divine the points of sympathy between your friends and yourself; to glide up to them naturally and without abruptness; to exhaust just so much of them and just that part of them which the temper of the present moment will bear, so that on the one hand the grasp of the topic is satisfactorily full, and on the other not so full as to have become tedious; to bid farewell to a channel when you once have done with it, and not be perpetually recurring to it afterwards; to infuse the flavor of your own individuality so delicately that there is no smack of egotism; to supplement, modify or wave aside your friend's statement with such fine

courtesy and grace that no wound is given to his feelings; to decide happily between friends who differ, and who appeal to you as the judge between them; to sip the nectar of the cup without stirring up any lees; to divine and employ all these little touches of sympathy and tact, is to infuse into conversation its most secret and living charm.

Mere vivacity with no substantial substratum may be quite entertaining. We love to listen to childish prattle. We say of a young girl overflowing with spirits and innocence—"She is interesting!" But if this liveliness be affected, or be coupled with deceit, it becomes an abomination. She must be veracious, no less than vivacious. The feigned Oh's! and Ah's! and Indeed's! and

It it possible's! and You don't say's! and emphatic nods and approving smiles and understanding looks and affectations of amazement are felt to be formal and habitual falsities, and if not very amusing are very painful to the stranger. What exaggerations, what embellishments, what perversions and attempts at concealment, what tragically heightened crises, occur in the course of a single conversation!

"Society hates gloomy people." That is a secret. She hates "pitiers of themselves." She quickly lets alone growlers or contradictors, and the "person who screams or uses the superlative degree." People do not want to be hearing about your ailments. There is no refreshing conversa-

tion to be had with a croaker. From the pessimist spreads bitterness instead of sunshine.

If you have your blue glasses on to-day, be sure that people will notice it. The other evening a tinge of gloom crept slowly across my mind as I was seated in the merry pavilion. I turned my chair and gazed out into the dark, wide sea. Before I knew it, I had become the evil genius of the whole happy party.

As a rule, people do not converse with us because they desire instruction. They are not seeking the benefit of our profound learning. They do not desire to consult us instead of the encyclopedia. It is better to talk wisely than learnedly.

Long strings of facts and figures, and whole chapters of opinions, speak well for our memory, but they smother the last vital spark in the listener's bosom.

The occasion gives the cue. We are now relaxing and much prefer the changeful murmuring of the passing breezes through a wayward Æolian harp to a solid and highly classic sonata. "The secret of tiring is to say everything that can be said on the subject." Further, we are not now in school It is not pleasant to converse with one who plays the role of the critic or the pedant, insisting at every step on the minutiæ of correctness. To appreciate substance is far more edifying than to bring up to the surface every trifling irreg-

ularity of form. I love my old college professor, who wears

"The weight
Of all that learning, lightly as a flower."

First approaches are by the beaten path. The more common the ground, the more comfortably we meet. Worthless weeds, blooming on every hand, may be plucked and analyzed without effort, and each personality gains a few moments to adjust itself to the other presence. If we cannot get along in discussing the weather, of what use is it to go any further together, and to drag our uneasy souls over the unfrequented lanes in quest of rarer, but more peculiar flowers. Plainly we are not congenial. When we understand each other, let us

leave the weeds and the dust at once and take to the natural windings and mossy unknown nooks of the soul.

The larger the company, the more difficult will be the choice of direction. No will must be constrained in its freedom or crossed in its caprice. Enough must be willing to talk, and the rest be willing to listen; all must be interested, and all either agree in fundamental principles, or else good humoredly and gracefully agree to disagree.

If our talk should not flow on with the steadiness of a millstream, just as little should it run dry in a few minutes. It should course through pleasing rather than peculiar channels. Trifling personal peculiarities are very annoying. We have

friends whose language is always jerky, always emphatic, or gushing, or mellifluous, or inquisitive, or colorless, or always without a dissenting note. These little mannerisms encase and protrude from the finer qualities like rough burrs and prickly spines, and so prevent access to very lovely hearts.

What a difference between the cluck of a barnyard fowl and the note of a robin or nightingale. That is the distinction between mere talk, and the ability to express original and appropriate ideas in an easy, sensible and entertaining manner.

The gifts and graces of conversation are as precious as pearls and diamonds. I read of Prince Metternich, the diplomatist, that he said, "In my whole life I have known only ten or twelve per-

sons with whom it was pleasant to converse,—*i. e.*, who keep to the subject, do not repeat themselves, and do not talk of themselves; men who do not listen to their own voice, who are cultivated enough not to lose themselves in commonplaces, and, lastly, who possess tact and good taste enough not to elevate their own persons above their subjects."

Perfect conversation is rare and high art. It is one of the finest of the fine arts. It adorns the parlor better than pictures or bronzes. It is in universal requisition as a useful art. It is well in place behind the counter or in the office. It graces the dinner more elegantly than richly cut crystal or porcelain from Dresden, Minton, or Sèvres.

From our leaving the cradle to our entering the grave is there a moment when it does not come into play!

When the hands begin to falter, and the eyes fail, and the feet are stayed; when roaming over field and through woods is no longer possible, and the intellectual life is barely possible, the charms of conversation, strengthened and enriched by each succeeding year's experience, and ripened and mellowed by the October sun, glorious with autumnal tints, will have only arrived at their fullest maturity.

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